



## PURPLE MARTINS

Purple Martins (*Progne subis*) are the largest swallows in North America measuring about 7-1/2 long. Adult males are glossy dark blue-black all over. Adult females have greyish-white bellies. Juveniles look similar to adult females. Average lifespan is 5 to 7 years. The longest recorded lifespan is 13.9 years for a banded martin in 1933 and found in 1947.

There are three subspecies of Purple Martins:

1. ***Progne subis subis***: the largest race breeding in eastern North America and Mexico and live exclusively in human provided housing.
2. ***Progne subis Hesperia***: breeds in the deserts of Arizona, western Mexico and Baja California and live only in Saguaro cacti.
3. ***Progne subis arboricola***: breeds in the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast of the U.S. and Canada.

Purple Martins are very social birds and live and migrate in flocks. The largest roosting colony was estimated to have 700,000 to 1 million birds at a time and was located on 12 acre Doolittle Island in Lake Murray, South Carolina. Martins are amazing aerial acrobats gliding and diving through the sky up to 45 mph in pursuit of flying insects over 500 feet above the ground. They live exclusively in human-supplied nesting boxes and gourds in the eastern U.S.

### MIGRATION

Purple Martins migrate between North and South America. They spend the spring and summer breeding season in North America and the fall and winter non-breeding season in Brazil and the Amazon River-basin to the Andes Mountains. The reverse-southern migration occurs from July through October after breeding season is complete. New young martins join with adults and migrate in large flocks.

The first birds to arrive in the early spring are a few males called "scouts." Their duty is to perform reconnaissance and make sure the colonies' nest boxes are in place and ready for the arrival of the flock. Generally, the first scouts arrive in Florida in early January and throughout the rest of the U.S. through April and Canada in May. The rest of the flock arrives a few weeks behind the scouts riding strong warm southerly winds progressing north at a rate of 3 degrees latitude every two weeks. You can be ready for the Purple Martins arrival by following the progress of the scouts on their northward spring migration online at [Scout Arrival Study](#).

Like other migrating birds, Purple Mountains follow [flyways](#) – highways in the sky – over land and water taking them over the U.S. Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America. As with all migrating birds, stopover habitat in all of these places is critical to bird survival so please make a difference and support habitat conservation efforts in your area.

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## NESTING

Once Purple Martins arrive in their spring breeding territory they mate and start nest building. Martins usually have only one brood per breeding season, except in the southern part of their breeding range where they may have two. Males and females share building the nest in three layers:

- Bottom: twigs, mud and pebbles
- Middle: smaller twigs and grasses
- Top (where eggs are laid): fresh green leaves

Females lay 2 to 7 white eggs, at the rate of one egg a day, and incubate the eggs – or clutch – for about two weeks. During this time males will bring females food or switch incubating so they can feed. Both parents feed the nestlings up to 60 times a day for about a month until they fledge – fly on their own. Parents will splash down into water and return to the nest to coat the young for cooling evaporation. It is common for fledglings to return to their nest to sleep at night.

## BEHAVIORAL TRADITION SHIFT

A fascinating process called “behavioral tradition shift” has occurred with Purple Martins in eastern North America after centuries of interaction with humans. Purple Martins natural nesting locations are in tree cavities and cliffs. However, in eastern North America they only live in houses and gourds supplied by humans. This appears to be the result of generations of behavioral conditioning wherein a symbiotic relationship formed between Purple Martins and humans beginning with the Native Americans. They realized the Purple Martins fed on flying insects and hung dried gourds in their gardens to attract them. A mutually beneficial relationship formed wherein the Purple Martins provided natural pest control for their crops and the proximity to humans provided the Purple Martins with protection from predators. The Native Americans passed this knowledge on to the settlers in eastern North America who continued the tradition of supplying the Purple Martins with gourds and houses. Today Purple Martins have totally abandoned natural nesting cavities in eastern North America and only live in human-supplied housing. However, the Purple Martins races in the southwest and west that did not have this interaction with humans still nest in natural cavities.

## PURPLE MARTIN HOUSES & GOURDS

You can help Purple Martins by putting up and properly maintaining houses and gourds. Purple Martins have specific requirements for the location and type of housing.

### Location Tips

- Place in a large open area at least 50 feet away from trees but near human activity
- 15 - 20 feet above the ground
- Close flying proximity to sources of water like a pond, lake, or river

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## Housing Tips

- Plastic gourds are recommended over houses as Purple Martins prefer them and they last longer and are easier to maintain.
- Entrance holes may be round and 2-1/8" in diameter or crescent shaped and 3" wide by 1-2/15" high to restrict starlings.

## FOOD & WATER

Purple Martins are aerial insectivores only eating flying insects like beetles, moths, and cicadas that they catch in the air. One Purple Martin will eliminate 350 pounds or 68,000 bugs during a nesting season. Contrary to popular belief Purple Martins do not consume mosquitoes. Purple Martins fly during the day and high above the ground whereas mosquitoes are generally out only at dawn and dusk and stay close to the ground. Purple Martins survival is dependent on the availability of insects and they are prone to starvation if the temperature drops below 50 degrees for an extended period of time when the supply of insects decreases. You can make the difference for martin survival during adverse weather by providing mealworms.

Purple Martins rarely use bird baths, instead they drink while skimming over the surface of water and bathe in rain or on the edge of a pond or lake.

## CARE & FIRST AID

[Tending to Sick, Injured, or Orphaned Purple Martins](#)

## RESOURCES

[A Basic Guide to Feeding Martins](#)

[Purple Martin Conservation Society](#)